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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the issue of improving student retention and quality of life on campus through the application of principles expressed by Sabre (1980) involving community development. Sabre's ethical principle of nurturing the capacity for mutual persuasion is discussed as a central vision and purpose for organizing and guiding community development in residence hall settings. The capacity for mutual persuasion is considered in terms of its effects on shaping student orientations to knowledge, people, and institutions. In essence, this principle provides a basis for balancing what are frequently regarded as mutually exclusive concepts, such as optimism and skepticism, individuality and mutuality, justice and compassion. It is noted that, as difficult as it may sometimes be to promote, compromise and plurality are necessary qualities of a healthy community. It is recommended that residence life professionals consider nurturance of the capacity for mutual persuasion as a central guiding vision and purpose in developing community in higher education. (GLR)

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# A framework for residence hall community development

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# A framework for residence hall community development

## Introduction

Many authors have discussed the benefits of developing a sense of community in higher education; shared goals, responsibilities, and communication (Mable, Terry, & Duvall, 1977). Tinto's (1975) synthesis of retention literature emphasized the value of community in terms of faculty and staff contact with students. Boyer (1990) equated the search for community with the need to find a larger sense of purpose; a shared vision above all goals. Providing a forum for good communication, finding means to pass on the heritage of the community, and supporting a just and disciplined society are essential ingredients for the development of community on our campuses (Boyer, 1990).

Residence life programs are uniquely situated in the campus environment to provide focus for community development efforts to ease student transition into college, particularly in the critical freshman year. Residence halls provide convenient locations for programs, services, and staffing practices that can increase student chances for academic success (Zeller, 1991). Authors have described many community development approaches, both academic and social, for resident students (Collins, 1983). Because of

the variety of methods available, many student affairs professionals are now recognizing the need to identify basic principles to guide these activities.

Vision and sense of purpose represent the basis upon which caring and bonding can be built. However, it may be easier to speak of forming vision and a guiding sense of purpose than it is to actually identify them. Such a vision must be ethical in character, in order to insure the survival and success of a community. It must be elegant in order to be widely understood and attractive. And yet it must also be robust, to have value in the fluid circumstances of a complex and lively higher education environment. The aim of this paper is to show how residence life programs can be guided and enhanced by application of Sabre's (1980) ethical principle of community development.

## Discussion

A basic concern of community developers is the relationship of small communities to the larger ones in which they exist (Alinsky, 1969). As components of higher educations, residence life programs accept special responsibilities, traditions, and purposes. The most ancient and fundamental purpose of higher education is the pursuit of knowledge. Newman (1938) described the purpose of a university as follows, "It is the place to which a thousand schools make contributions; in which the intellect

may range and speculate, sure to find its equal in some antagonist activity, and its judge in the tribunal of truth. It is a place where inquiry is pushed forward, and discoveries verified and perfected, and rashness rendered innocuous, and error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge" (p. 38). The central goal of higher education is to produce educated people, or as Barbara Tuchman (1967) put it, "the person capable of the informed exercise of judgement, taste and values (p. 6). The one common concept in nearly all approaches to residence life is that residence halls should provide an educational benefit to students. The residence hall experience should enrich each students's life and contribute to holistic development (Bleming, & Nitterberger, 1990).

To guide community development in the traditions of higher education, Sabre (1980) offered the following basic principle, "act in each instance as to encourage, rather than suppress the capacity to be persuaded, whether the capacity in question is yours or another's" (p. 19). Sabre believed that emphasis on mutuality and open mindedness promotes both intellectual growth and social cohesion. What is different about Sabre's view is that it elevates ethical reasoning from a background set of professional guidelines to the central unifying purpose of the community, blending ethical standards of residence life staff, the student conduct code, and the educational objectives of the

institution.

For residence life professionals the implications of Sabre's principle are many. A residential student community must encourage the development of people that are both assertive and receptive, influential and yet simultaneously open to influence. The community itself must model these very qualities. This constitutes a great challenge because rather than prescribing a simple formulaic approach, Sabre's view requires a continuous effort to achieve creative balance between shifting and naturally opposing forces. As Albert Schweitzer (1987) observed, "Anyone who undertakes the voyage to true ethics must be prepared to be carried around in the whirlpool of the irrational" (p. 292).

By what is emphasized and left out of a residence life program communicates underlying judgements of value. Sabre's (1980) ethical principle places importance on the capacity to persuade and to be persuaded, the reciprocal flow of knowledge and learning. Qualities of a civilized community such as tolerance, compromise, and reason all extend from this basic condition of openness. By identifying the capacity for bi-lateral persuasion as a central vision and purpose, residence life professionals can play a far-reaching role in shaping student orientations to knowledge, people, and institutions.

1. Orientation to knowledge.

Basic student development theory holds that the entire

collegiate environment is educational, that students are primarily responsible for their development, and that student development should be an integral part of the curriculum (Miller, & Prince, 1976). Therefore a residence life program will, through its structure, influence individual orientations to knowledge itself. If residence hall are viewed as mere living quarters, separate from the academic functions of the institution, then a passive and narrow orientation to knowledge is encouraged. Such a structure implies that academic and social pursuits are separate, that students receives knowledge in specific locations only and may be unconcerned with it in others.

Sabre's (1980) ethical principle, which focuses on development of persuasive capacities and the ability to be persuaded, can only be adhered to in an environment in which learning is pervasive. Thus a constant goal of a residential community extending from Sabre's principle would be to educate people to be dedicated, realistic, and assertively capable of operationalizing values and ideals, yet embodying a recognition of the role open mindedness plays in progress. In other words, this model attempts to achieve an orientation to knowledge that blends elements of both optimism and skepticism. Optimism in relation to knowledge is the view that knowledge leads to ends that are essentially good. This view necessarily precedes action and commitment. Skepticism, on the other hand, leads a person

to question any proposition to determine its actual merits, and also insures enough doubt that a person never becomes certain they are beyond the possibility of being shown something new. The residence hall, in short, must be a place where students are exposed to complexity and encouraged to act.

Residence halls can promote a dynamic learning atmosphere by experimental joint ventures with other elements of the campus community. For example, tutorial sessions ordinarily offered in a campus Learning Center might find a wider audience in residence halls. Student activities planned around themes such as Alcohol Awareness Week or Black History Month might find their best application in residence hall settings. By extending the invitation to other campus groups to bring their activities into the residence halls, the message is being given broadly that residence halls are an integral part of the educational mission. But more importantly, the invitation to other campus groups leads to living conditions for students in which learning is pervasive.

2. Orientation to people.

Sabre's ethical principle also implies that a creative balance is vital between the concepts of mutuality and individuality. Each member of a community must find personal identity in relation to the surrounding group (Chickering, 1969). Residence life programs must seek ways

for peer groups to positively persuade each member but be open to the positive influence of each member. For this to occur, students must develop awareness of personal values while simultaneously learning the usefulness of compromise.

One of the chief justifications for residence life systems is that they provide such a rich environment for group interactions to take place. In addition to roommate interaction, opportunities for values clarification typically include participation in planning committees, hall councils, floor meetings, and group task forces. These interactions frequently have a multi-cultural dimension which increases the diversification of viewpoints represented. In these circumstances interpersonal conflict is unavoidable, and may even be viewed as desirable when it leads to creative solutions. However, conflict can also lead to suppression of individuality or fragmentation of the community if it becomes so heated that the importance of bi-lateral persuasion is forgotten. Therefore, it is vital that residence life staff be skilled interpersonal and small group mediators. The key to success is to have a well known and articulated vision stressing the relationship between individual and group identity, and calling for constant articulation of values.

In order for residence life staff to effectively model the ideals of personal growth and community development, living groups must be organized into small sub-groups

(floors and wings). These sub-groups can be in the area of 20 to 25 residents with a student staff member assigned as advisor and catalyst in order to promote a sense of belonging and community across the group. It can be an expectation that each staff member conduct regular floor activities to promote positive interaction. Activities should include those that promote values differentiation through discussion, and confront behaviors that do not acknowledge the importance to the community of diversity and sharing. Personal growth and community development can be fostered by pairing those who are different and making effective use of current issues and teachable moments. Even the planning and implementation of social events can lead to personal growth and community development when the process of mutual respect is considered an important outcome.

3. Orientation to institutions.

Because of its unique position as a two way conduit of information, residence life has the dual role of conveying student interests to the institutional community at large. and representing institutional interests to students (Reitzes & Reitzes, 1980). Resident students have the opportunity to closely observe institutional dynamics, both functional and dysfunctional, and may thereby be influenced in their orientation to institutions.

Residence life programs can apply Sabre's (1980) emphasis on bi-lateral persuasion by encouraging and

modeling a balance between justice and compassion. Through the formation and exercise of rules, students have the opportunity to balance personal freedoms with the needs of the community, and thus enjoy a stable environment for accomplishing goals. It is important that systems are seen by students to be open to modification, to avoid stagnation and insensitivity. Thus, students need to have an active voice in forming the rules and policies that regulate their community. Similarly, it is vital that students have, to the appropriate extent, the opportunity to participate in and be subject to peer review in matters of discipline. Healthy communities offer broad avenues for inclusion in growth promoting activities while narrowing opportunities for offenses.

Within the context of a residential community, disciplinary systems are an important part of the educational environment. The chief value of a system of consequences for rules infractions is that it offers the possibility that students will be persuaded by values that are central to an ethical community, such as fairness and consistency, non-violence, respect for people and property, etc. In order for this to happen there must be an effort to enforce rules in an even-handed manner, avoiding capricious harshness or leniency. A track record of fair enforcement of rules makes it clear that the safety of all community members is a fundamental requirement and will not be

sacrificed. For this value to be realized it is vital that detailed, timely, and unambiguous explanations, both to the offender and the community at large, accompany all disciplinary actions. Mis-information in the form of rumors can negate the positive learning influence of a disciplinary system.

The disciplinary systems of an ethical residence hall community must be open to appeal on situational grounds. The individuality and rights of those accused of rules violations must be respected by taking into fair consideration the cause and effect factors that led to the infraction (Tremper, 1987). This can be achieved by applying progressive discipline, which takes the circumstances of the offence and the disciplinary history of the student into consideration before determining the severity of the penalty. This practice encourages student learning in two ways. It will maximize the offender's chance for growth and learning by avoiding the penalties that are unnecessarily harsh and alienating. It is necessary in an ethical learning environment to avoid punishments that are humiliating spectacles. As Clarence Darrow (1932) once observed, "To punish men (sic) because they have done wrong without heeding whether any good can come from the pain inflicted is pure vengeance" (p. 341). Penalties can be sought that are constructive in character, ideally community service tasks.

Additionally, progressive discipline is helpful for student staff because it promotes a clear understanding that enforcement of behavior guidelines is an educational process. Student staff face the difficult task of being both administrators charged with enforcing the rules of the institution and facilitators committed to helping each student feel they are part of the residence hall community (Gathercoal, 1991). For student arbitrators progressive discipline preserves the character of an educational community by emphasizing discernment rather than mechanical response.

Rules, it must be remembered, are specific expressions of a collective wish for justice. Occasionally, extenuating circumstances make enforcement of a rule self-defeating. In general, a residence hall community can remain true to its purposes by always asking whether justice is served by the rules as written and applied. Nothing is perfect, and sometimes the spirit of a rule will not be accurately reflected in its wording. When justice would clearly not be served by enforcement of a rule, the community should have the integrity of conscience to grant a special dispensation. Naturally, the setting of precedents should be a careful practice, and can be enhanced as a learning experience by a thorough explanation to the resident community.

## Summary

Recently it has become increasingly clear that

community development is vital to the success of higher education. Boyer (1990) has pointed out that the basis of a viable community is vision and a sense of purpose. The aim of this paper has been to show that Sabre's (1980) ethical principle of community development can offer residence life professionals opportunities to positively influence student orientations to knowledge, people, and institutions.

Sabre's ethical principle requires action in every circumstance to promote the capacity to persuade and be persuaded, whether that capacity is your own or another's. In essence, this principle provides a basis for balancing what are frequently regarded as mutually exclusive concepts, such as optimism and skepticism, individuality and mutuality, justice and compassion. As difficult as it may sometimes be to promote, compromise and plurality are necessary qualities of a healthy community. We recommend that residence life professionals consider nurturance of the capacity for mutual persuasion as a central guiding vision and purpose in developing community in higher education.

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